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AUTHOR Iverson, Landa J.; Chavez, Janice A.

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ABSTRACT

This study compared the knowledge and skill levels of urban and rural special education teachers across 13 emotional and behavior disordered (EBD) competency areas. Fifty-eight graduate students enrolled in special education courses at California State University at Fresno completed the Emotionally and Behaviorally Disordered Teacher Competencies Assessment, which measures teachers' perceived proficiency levels in 13 areas of competence. Approximately 58 percent of the students were employed as special education teachers under emergency credentials and 17 percent possessed a professional special education credential. Fifty-five percent were employed in urban school districts, while 42.6 percent were employed in rural school districts. Results indicate that both rural and urban teachers felt they were most skilled in managing the learning environment, instructional content and practice, and cultural and linguistic diversity. The lowest scores in knowledge proficiency for both teacher groups were related to transition, professional and ethical behavior, and community resources. Rural teachers indicated that learner characteristics and vocational competencies were their lowest skill areas, while urban teachers indicated that professional and ethical practices and monitoring and evaluation were their lowest skill areas. Although there were no significant differences between rural and urban teachers' competencies, this study indicates that special education teachers, in general, do not feel they have reached a level of mastery when working with EBD students. (LP)

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Landa J. Iverson, Ph.D.
Janice A. Chavez, Ph.D.
California State University, Fresno
Fresno, California

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A COMPARISON OF RURAL AND URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER NEEDS IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

Teaching children with emotional and behavior disorders can be challenging, particularly in rural areas. The National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (NRSSC) defined a rural school district as a continuum represented by multiple subcultures which includes the interaction of topography, population sparsity, and community or district characteristics (Helge, 1984). Helge (1983) stated that two-thirds (67%) of all school districts are classified as rural. These schools are frequently forced to hire unqualified personnel through temporary certifications. Helge (1984) also found that the hiring standards for rural personnel was lower than the hiring standards for the non-rural areas. In 1981, Helge surveyed special education administrators in 22 states and found that recruiting special education teachers was the most significant problem faced in rural school districts.

Approximately 14 years later, school administrators continue to identify the problem of attracting and retaining qualified personnel as the major difficulty in providing services to special education students (Lembke, 1995). Lembke further cited Henry (1986) who found that behavior management and student discipline are two primary reasons why teachers leave the profession. These same two areas surfaced in the literature in the area of behavior disorders as to why teachers working with emotional and/or behavioral disordered (EBD) students do not remain in their teaching positions.

When attempting to provide appropriate special education services in rural areas to children with EBD, administrators rely on colleges and universities to certify that preservice teachers have attained a level of professional competency. Several preservice models were developed specifically to train teachers to work with children with EBD in rural areas. Iverson, Johnson, and Harlow (1992) designed a preventative rural teacher preparation program that offered general education teachers and administrators intensive training in working more effectively with EBD students. Similarly, Joyce and Wienke (1988) trained teachers with minimal background in behavior disorders on the primary competencies of behavior management and curricular instruction. In a related study, Peterson and Maddux (1988) surveyed perceptions of general and special educators toward educating children who demonstrate hyperactive behavior. They found that both general and special education teachers felt that possessing specific skills in teaching and managing behaviors were important in minimizing distractions, setting clear expectations and rules, and the effective use of time out procedures.

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Method

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine the similarities and differences between urban and rural special education teachers and their knowledge and skill levels across 13 EBD competency areas as originally identified by the Center for Quality Special Education (1990) and the Council for Exceptional Children (1992). These competencies included characteristics of learners, assessment and diagnosis of EBD, instructional content and practice, managing the learning environment, managing student behavior, transitions, monitoring and evaluation, cultural and linguistic diversity, communication and collaboration, families, community resources, legal and administrative structure, and professional and ethical practice.

Participants

Participants in this study were 58 graduate students enrolled in special education courses at California State University at Fresno. These teachers were concurrently employed in special education classrooms in both rural and urban settings. The sample was comprised of 44 female and 14 male students with a mean age of 35.3 years. Self-reports of ethnicity included 69.1% Caucasian, 23.2% Hispanic, 5.4% African American, and 1.8% Asian American. College degrees and teaching credentials held by the participants are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Percent of Degrees and Credentials Completed

Degree/Credential	Percent
Bachelors Degree Completed	
Liberal Arts	38.6
Specific Academic (e.g., biology)	59.7
Teaching Credential Held	
Special Education Internship	25.0
Elementary Education	67.2
Secondary Education	20.7
Bilingual Education	6.9
Emergency Special Education	32.8
Clear Special Education	17.2
Other	15.5

The majority of the participants held a specific academic degree (59.7%) or a Liberal Arts bachelor's degree (38.6%). Elementary education teaching credentials were held by 67.2% as compared to 20.7% in secondary education, 6.9% in bilingual education, and 15.5% in other certificates and authorizations. Approximately 58% of special education teachers were employed under emergency credentials and 17.2% possessed a professional special education credential.

Fifty-five percent of the participants were employed in urban school districts, 42.6% were employed in rural districts, and 2.4% were unknown. The average teaching experience was 1.7 years and the average number of special education graduate credits completed was 21.4.

Instrument

The instrument was designed to elicit demographic information and participant responses to the Emotionally and Behaviorally Disordered (EBD) Teacher Competencies Assessment (Institute for Adolescents with Behavior Disorders, 1994). Participants completed demographic information which included sex, ethnicity, age, credentials/degrees held, completed special education course units, and identification of their school district as urban or rural.

The EBD Teacher Competencies Assessment was administered to the participants and were requested to identify their proficiency levels in knowledge and skill using a 5-point likert scale indicating a 1 = none or little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = moderate, 4 = strong, or 5 = mastery across all 13 competency areas.

Results

The results provided several interesting findings. Mean scores in both the rural and urban teacher groups were tabulated for knowledge and skill levels in each competency area and for overall proficiency. In general, results indicated that special education teachers in rural and urban settings rated their knowledge (M=2.89; M=2.91) and skill (M=3.05; M=3.21) proficiency in the moderate level as reflected in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Knowledge, Skill, and Combined Scores by Competency

Competency Area	Knowledge	Skill
Characteristics of Learners	2.80	2.65
Assessment/Diagnosis of EBD	2.65	3.19
Instructional Content and Practice	3.25	3.45
Managing Learning Environment	3.57	3.52
Managing Student Behavior	3.01	3.25
Transitions	2.59	2.72
Monitoring and Evaluation	3.10	2.65
Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	3.23	3.62
Communication and Collaboration	3.17	3.24
Families	2.90	3.00
Community Resources	2.55	2.54
Legal and Administrative Structure	2.86	2.73
Professional and Ethical Practice	2.58	3.44
Overall Proficiency	2.94	3.08

In overall proficiency and overall knowledge proficiency, both rural and urban teachers rated the competencies of managing the learning environment, instructional content and practice, and cultural and linguistic diversity the highest relative to other competencies. The lowest scores in knowledge proficiency included transitions (M=2.47; M=2.54), professional and ethical practice (M=2.25; M=2.69) and community resources (M=2.47; M=2.55) for both teacher groups. The teachers' skill proficiency was rated highest in cultural and linguistic diversity (M=3.58; M=3.74), managing the learning environment (M=3.71; M=3.41), and instructional content and practice (M=3.58; M=3.36) for both groups. Rural and urban teachers identified community resources (M=2.48) M=2.56) as their lowest skill area; whereas, rural teachers selected characteristics of learners (M=2.46) and transitions (M=2.54) as their lowest skill competencies and urban teachers selected professional and ethical practices (M=2.58) and monitoring and evaluation (M=2.71) as their lowest skill competencies. Both teacher groups agreed that their lowest overall proficiency was in community resources (M=2.47; M=2.55), transitions (M=2.50; M=2.65), and characteristics of learners (M=2.61; M=2.81).

T-tests for independent samples were conducted on ethnicity (Caucasian and noncaucasian), age (20-34 years and over 35 years), school district (rural and urban), teaching experience in special education (less than 2 years and more than 2 years), and special education course units (under 21 units and over 21 units). Results of ethnicity, age, urban and rural school district, and teaching experience indicated no significant difference between the means for each of the independent variables as illustrated in Table 3.

TABLE 3

T-tests for Independent Samples-Ethnicity, Age, School District, and Teaching Experience

Variable	Mean	SD	t-value
Caucasian	3.13	.603	
Non Caucasian	3.01	.683	.57
20-34 years	3.08	.666	
35+ years	3.06	.590	.12
Rural	3.06	.550	
Urban	3.11	.793	.22
Less than 2 years	2.99	.632	
Over 2 years	3.23	.632	-1.26
Under 21 units	3.06	.601	
Over 21 units	3.10	.655	-.19

Dependent samples t-tests were computed between rural and urban teacher's knowledge and skill in each of the competency areas and in overall proficiency. No significant differences were found between rural and urban special education teachers and knowledge, skill, and overall proficiency (see Table 4).

TABLE 4

T-values between Urban and Rural Groups Across Competency Area

Competency Area	Level	Mean	SD	t-value
Characteristics of Learners	Urban	2.81	.864	
	Rural	2.61	.557	.94
Assessment and Diagnosis	Urban	2.95	.906	
	Rural	3.87	.716	.33
Instructional Content and Practice	Urban	3.31	.808	
	Rural	3.47	.480	-.84
Managing Learning Environment	Urban	3.47	.728	
	Rural	3.67	.534	1.00
Managing Student Behavior	Urban	3.18	.871	
	Rural	3.11	.579	.28
Transitions	Urban	2.65	.896	
	Rural	2.50	.864	.53
Monitoring and Evaluation	Urban	2.95	.971	
	Rural	2.86	.821	.34
Cultural and Language Diversity	Urban	3.47	.924	
	Rural	3.36	.867	.40
Communication and Collaboration	Urban	3.31	.830	
	Rural	3.09	.820	.86
Families	Urban	2.95	.932	
	Rural	2.93	1.034	-.83
Community Resources	Urban	2.55	1.024	
	Rural	2.47	.983	.26
Legal and Administrative Structure	Urban	2.88	.994	
	Rural	2.64	1.084	.75
Professional and Ethical Practice	Urban	3.14	.89	
	Rural	2.78	.85	1.34
Overall Knowledge Proficiency	Urban	2.91	.831	
	Rural	2.89	.685	.07
Overall Skill Proficiency	Urban	3.21	.791	
	Rural	3.05	.588	.70
Overall Proficiency	Urban	3.11	.793	
	Rural	3.06	.550	.22

* $p < .05$

Discussion

Serving students with EBD is a challenge for teachers who have minimal training and limited experience in special education. California is currently facing a severe special education teacher shortage and as a result a large number of uncertified teachers are employed by school districts to teach the most difficult students. Teachers instructing students with EBD should be grounded in best practice which requires knowledge and skills in appropriate procedures and

curriculum (Whelan & Simpson, 1996). In order to investigate teacher perceptions in relation to identified competencies, various knowledge and skill areas in the professional field of educating students with EBD need to be considered.

This study revealed several findings. Special education teachers in rural and urban settings expressed that they had a moderate grasp of knowledge and skill competence in teaching students with EBD. Both rural and urban teachers were most knowledgeable and skilled in managing the learning environment, instructional content and practice and cultural and linguistic diversity relative to other competencies. These instructional and diversity competencies appeared to be adequately addressed in preservice coursework, inservice training, or on-the-job experience. In the sample, approximately 30% of the special education teachers were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Within the regional rural and urban school districts, students with EBD also share the same backgrounds as their teachers. In this context, it is not surprising that these teachers would perceive themselves as being adequately prepared to address the diversity issues in their classrooms. From these results, it is apparent that whether a teacher works in a rural or urban school their needs appear to be similar. Although teachers in the sample expressed that they received adequate training in instructional content and practice and in diversity issues the results did not indicate they had reached the mastery level.

Rural and urban special education teachers reported below average knowledge in addressing vocational transition needs, awareness of professional and ethical standards, and identifying and utilizing community resources, and below average skills in utilizing community resources. The rural and urban teacher groups differed from one another in their identification of their lowest skill competencies. Rural teachers selected characteristics of learners and vocational transition competencies as their lowest skill areas, while urban teachers selected professional and ethical practices and monitoring and evaluation as their lowest skills relative to other competencies.

The central valley of California shares similar problems of personnel shortage as other parts of the state. Its agrarian economy and rural nature provides additional challenges to teachers and training institutions that serve these teachers. As with other urban areas of the state, rural teachers have not acquired the level of knowledge and skills necessary to effectively serve students with multiple needs. Although no significant differences were found between rural and urban special education teachers in this study, these results indicate that special education teachers, in general, do not feel they had reached a level of mastery when working with EBD students.

These findings have implications to teacher training programs serving teachers employed under emergency credentials. The examination of alternative certification models, such as internship programs, is critical to the identification of effective teacher preparation models. In these programs, special education teachers merge theory (what they have learned through coursework) with practice (application of this knowledge in their classroom). A bridge between knowledge and skills is established as specific teaching competencies are applied and evaluated in the classroom situation. A strong grounding in these essential competencies is critical to the success of the special education teachers and the student with emotional and behavioral disorders.

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